



## News As Changing Texts. Corpora, Methodologies And Analysis.

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### NEWS AS CHANGING TEXTS

*Corpora, Methodologies and Analysis*

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BIRTE BÖS AND UDO FRIES

### Recensione di Anna Belladelli.

The volume, published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing and divided into four chapters, explores almost four hundred years of newspaper writing. One of the assets of the book is the very chapter organization, which is not based on equally distributed time spans, but rather on relevant turning points in news history and also on the specific academic expertise of the authors. This editorial decision allows for a less pre-packaged and more lively approach to changes in news discourse and format. Another valuable aspect of the book is that, as experts and even compilers of machine-readable corpora, the authors share their personal experience and concerns with readers, such as the need to focus on amounts of news material that can be searched electronically but which can also be read and analyzed manually in their entirety. Moreover, available corpora (such as ZEN, the largest corpus of late 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century newspapers, compiled by Fries himself *et al.*) are described, evaluated, and sometimes critiqued as for size and features, thus enabling the academic reader – and, more broadly, the scientific community – to gather useful information and stimuli for further research.

As Facchinetti claimed during a book presentation at the University of Verona, Italy (May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012), what has changed through the centuries is not the text type, but rather the media by which news is spread and broadcast, which have undoubtedly affected some features of news writing but which haven't shaken its essence and basic structure. The same can be said about the primary function of journalism: besides overtly and covertly persuasive, manipulative, and propagandistic uses that have sometimes been made in the past and are still made nowadays, the first and foremost aim of journalism has remained information.

Although the volume has a solid corpus-driven vocation, it is not only targeted at corpus linguists or media experts. Non-professionals in the field of English-speaking journalism might find useful historical digressions, as well as intriguing and even amusing details. For instance, one will learn that the term *gazette* used to have a pejorative connotation in early newspaper times, or that newspapers in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century included a small section called *ship news* or *port news*, where the reader was informed of which ships had been pulling into and sailing off the major English ports, the purpose of their journey, and their captain's name. Another fascinating subject which could appeal to the non-academic reader is the evolution of English graphemics as reflected in the newspapers analyzed: up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century there weren't strict spelling rules or house styles, to the point that the same word could be spelled in different ways in the same article, or even in the same sentence.

Having said that, let us take a look at the main topics dealt with in the volume. Chapter One (by Nicholas Brownlees) only focuses on forty-five years, from 1620 to 1665, the year when the *London Gazette* was born. It was an age of experimentation and great variation in the way news was presented to readers. Professionals in the field of linguistics and pragmatics may particularly appreciate the corpus-based analyses carried out in this chapter. Brownlees investigates the use of first and second person pronouns (*I/we* and *you/thou/thee*) in order to better understand how

writers of news articles used to construe their authorial/editorial persona back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and which kind of intersubjective rapport was established with readers. Results show that the early newspaper years were characterized by heterogeneity and experimentation: since news writers and editors/printers were often the same person, there was a high degree of stylistic personalization and idiolectism, along with a wide range of voices and identities both regarding the news writers and the readers.

Chapter Two (by Udo Fries) is devoted to the rise of newspaper writing in the British Isles, which started approximately in the 1670s. News publications appeared with varying frequency (from daily to weekly) not only in London, but also in Edinburgh and in most major British towns.

If we think of allegedly “modern” mixed text types, such as *advertorials* or *infomercials*, we might be surprised at learning that they were extremely frequent in 17<sup>th</sup>- and early 18<sup>th</sup>-century newspapers, as they were blended into the news sections in the shape of letters or announcements, and their inner discursive structure made it quite clear that they were given to the paper for publication by someone from the outside (cf. Chapter Two: 73-77). Later on, however, paralinguistic elements, such as small heads reading *An advertisement* or *Announcement*, were introduced in the layout, in an early attempt to separate commercial, legal, and institutional communication from mere news.

A fascinating side of early newspaper writing is the central role of translation. Foreign news were considered as the most relevant and worthy of being spread. This attitude was visible in the very layout of newspapers, at least up until the 1730s, as foreign news was printed on the front page, followed by domestic news. Most pieces of news came from Holland, Italy, Spain, France, and Germany. And since in many cases editors merely “translated and pasted” foreign articles onto their English-speaking newspapers, we could argue that textual analysis of early British journalism cannot be severed from translation studies and comparative discourse analysis, assuming that trends and features of news communication in other languages and cultures did inevitably affect the final outcome.

Chapter Three starts off by mentioning two historical events that deeply affected the development of journalism in Great Britain, i.e., the repeal of the Newspaper Licensing Act (1695), which allowed for the birth of a great number of newspapers all over the country, and the Stamp Act of 1712, which was an actual attempt to ban most newspapers by requiring, among other things, that whole-sheet sized publications be taxed with a one-penny stamp (Black 1987). Until their final abolition in 1855, the stamp acts caused major changes. First of all, in the attempt to dribble the law, some printers started to issue six-pages newspapers instead of the regular *in folio* four-pages ones, increasing advertisement space, while others interpreted the law in a different way and started to squeeze as much textual material as they could in less (but larger-sized) sheets of paper. Moreover, the price raise caused a shift in readership, as many workers could no longer afford to buy a newspaper with the same frequency of the past. And consequently, experimentation and creativity on the part of editors became more difficult, because higher taxation equaled to shorter lives for minor publications. So once again, historical events forced newspapers to change, which forced newspaper writing and readership to change.

Chapter Three also fulfils the quite challenging task of covering two centuries of news writing, from 1760 to 1960, that author Birte Bös describes as the rise and development of popular journalism as we know it. First of all, the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the birth of evening and Sunday papers, and in particular the consolidation of a long-time unmatched news authority, i.e. *The Times*, founded in 1785 with the – quite pretentious, one might add – name *The Daily Universal*. Besides the abolition of the stamp acts in 1855, social events determined the explosion of newspaper circulation too, such as the increase of literacy among the lower classes. Class became a relevant issue in journalism during the Industrial Revolution, to the extent that independent, or “radical” newspapers, first circulating illegally unstamped before 1855, maintained their fame among the working classes after that year, coming to outsell regular newspapers. Their popularity among poorer readers determined the content of their articles, which focused on working class struggles and issues. In terms of text types, those newspapers had a higher number of letters, in order to establish a more direct and sympathetic relationship with readers. This kind of newspapers are also responsible for inventing marketing strategies that are still effective nowadays, such as little gifts and special offers to appeal to readers.

But radical press was eventually defeated by a newer type of press material, i.e. Sunday papers. Gossip and sensationalism made their first appearance in British press and outsold both socially engaged radical press and traditional “educational” journals.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century sees the birth of so-called New Journalism. Again, what triggered such a deep shift in news

discourse was not a “sudden” cultural change so much as a series of technological advances that made an increasing amount of news available on a daily (and even hourly) basis. Up to then, news writers had a hard time finding news to fill the empty spaces on the page – now, for the first time, they had a hard time selecting what to keep and what to leave out.

Given the time span assigned to her (1960s to the present time), in Chapter Four Facchinetti has to address the interrelationship between image and verbiage, which is not altogether novel to news writing, but which has developed in new and sometimes unexpected ways with the most recent technological innovations. What seems to be different are the power relations between news readers and news writers: a piece of news may be spread both by traditional journalism (via newspapers, TV news, newspaper websites, the radio) and by non-traditional journalism (blogs, social networks etc.), which may confirm, question, or even confute the validity of the former. As the author reminds, surveys show that the so-called “citizen journalism” is now considered more reliable and less subject to hidden agendas and manipulation than the traditional one. So the language and media analyst is no longer limited to the analysis of the mere semiotic connections between verbiage, images and videos, but is also called to tackle much wider issues of authority, power, and truth, in a completely different way.

The phenomenon of news blogging may be read as an instantiation of Vico's cyclical theory of history: today's bloggers are at the same time news writers, editors, proofreaders, typesetters, publishers, and advertisers of their own “newspaper”, just like it used to be in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, a corpus-driven approach is able to confute some of the stereotypes that have characterized recent changes in news discourse. Facchinetti (pp. 194-195) quotes *The Economist*, according to which news writing has become more and more “opinionated, polarized and partisan” on account of the shift towards the above-mentioned forms of “private” newsmaking. She claims that close linguistic analysis has been able to prove this belief wrong, since newswriters have always conveyed their stance through language, and the linguistic study of the use of modalized expressions, positive/negative polarity, passive/active constructions, and so on, is an effective tool to detect those communicative strategies and bring them to the fore.

On the whole, *News as Changing Texts* can be considered as a valid resource both for those who need a concise linguistic and socio-historical overview of the main changes in English-speaking newswriting (mainly British) and for those who have specific research interests in corpus linguistics. Indeed, many aspects of newswriting are investigated by means of this approach, which proves to be particularly reliable and suitable for this kind of analysis. However, given the relevance of paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements in newspaper writing, the volume might have benefited from a small illustration section, showing samples of front pages (and more recently, homepages) dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in order for professional and non-professional readers to better understand the interconnection between technological advances, media development, and textual changes.

## References

Black, Jeremy. *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Routledge, 1987.